

The Many Lives of Dominic Savio, Boy-Saint : An Introduction¹

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On June 12th, 1954, a fifteen year old Italian boy named Dominic Savio was raised to the honours of the altar² by Pope Pius XII. Dominic Savio was a pupil of the illustrious priest-educator, Saint John (Don) Bosco, founder of the Salesians, a teaching order dedicated to the education of poor working class youth. Dominic Savio's reputation for sanctity was founded in large part on a pious biography of him written by Don Bosco shortly after his death in 1857.³ In this influential hagiographic text, Dominic is held up as a perfect model of purity and obedience for young boys, the ideal exemplar of the Salesian philosophy of a sound and well-rounded Catholic education. With a number of other adolescent male saints – very often novice members of influential religious congregations such as the Jesuits⁴ – Dominic Savio occupies a rather unique position in the roll call of Roman Catholic saints: that of the young pre- or post-pubescent boy whose claim to sainthood rests in large part on his bodily integrity. A parallel model exists for young females, reflected ideally in the virgin-martyr saint of the early Christian persecutions. The significant difference lies in the fact that the young women were often put to death as a result of wanting to preserve their chastity; the young men, on the other hand, had only to assume reasoned control over their baser passions.⁵ Therein can be found one of the crucial aspects of a misogynist “gendering” of Roman Catholic

sainthood: adolescent females die horrible deaths for the honour of their purity; adolescent males, though they may indeed die young, do so from natural, almost ethereal causes.

Sainthood is a cultural category. Who becomes a saint, when, why, and how, and especially in whose interests: all these reflect broader social, religious, political, and economic forces and concerns.⁶ As the vast majority of Catholic saints are members of religious orders of both genders, it is these very influential and sometimes powerful organizations which control, in large measure, the access of individuals to the glory of sainthood. In addition, canonization (the official sanctioning of sanctity by the church) is a formal process rigidly controlled by the clerical bureaucracy. As such, it reflects the ideological choices and priorities of the institution. Lay, non-clerical saints are few and far between, though this has begun changing dramatically under the current pope. Very often, such lay saints are “made,” so the speak, by virtue of their connections with a specific religious order, as was certainly the case with Dominic Savio and the Salesians. These saints-by-association also have a significant role to play in the furthering of the order’s mission and spirituality.

This book is not an historical or biographical study of St. Dominic Savio, though elements of both will certainly be found within its pages. Rather, it looks critically at the variety of ways in which the image of the 15-year-old saint served and was manipulated as an eloquent, though highly ambivalent, symbol of bodily purity and chastity for adolescent boys. As such, it represents a study of Catholic

saintly devotion, and the ways in which the Salesians themselves structured and propagated the Savio cult will be discussed. The Salesians are only one of the major players in this fascinating tale, however; the other two being pre-Vatican II Roman Catholicism and its teachings on sexual ethics, and, more generally, North American cultural anxieties of the 1950s and early 1960s over the uncertain and potentially dangerous sexuality of young males. For Catholic adolescents like me who came of age in this exceptional milieu, the image of the disciplined and ever vigilant Dominic Savio shone as a saving grace over our slothful and sinful souls.

The Short Life of a Very Good Boy⁷

Dominic Savio was born in the Piedmont region of northern Italy on April 2, 1842, the son of a blacksmith and the second child of a family of ten. From the beginning, his health was frail, though he harboured a persistent desire to become a priest. The home environment was a religious one, and Dominic was reputed to have been particularly pious from an early age. He received his first communion when he was only seven years old, a highly unusual practice for that time. Among the resolutions he took on that day, “Death, but not sin” remains, by far, the most significant in terms of his subsequent spiritual development (the others had to do with receiving regular sacraments, keeping feast days holy, and having Jesus and Mary as friends). In his life of Savio, Don Bosco relates an incident at the age of ten about a swimming hole. In the heat of summer, companions of the young boy pleaded with him to come bathing with them, presumably naked. Dominic, as might be expected, steadfastly refuses, claiming that it constitutes an occasion of

sin. Don Bosco's commentary on the event is especially telling: "How many youngsters mourn the loss of their innocence and attribute the reason to having gone bathing with such lads in those unfortunate places."⁸ One is not sure what might have happened exactly, but the tale fixes the virtue of purity at the very centre of the young boy's personality and future sanctity. At the age of twelve, Dominic entered the Oratory of St. Francis de Sales in Turin, thereby coming under the direct tutelage of Don Bosco himself, who had founded the school some eight years earlier. It is in large part based on his three short years at the Oratory that the young Savio's reputation for sanctity was established.

Dominic's life at the Oratory was that of an ordinary student, though it was marked by an acute sense of piety, obedience and devotion to the rules, and a zeal in caring for the religious welfare of his schoolmates. The young boy was keen on engaging in extreme forms of bodily mortification, but Don Bosco forbade it on the grounds of his age and poor health. Among the mundane incidents that later became the stuff of hagiographic legend, one particularly famous story revolves around a violent stone fight that Dominic intercepted by placing himself between the two protagonists, raised crucifix in hand, asking them to kill him instead of each other. Other stories tell of the young saint being found in a state of ecstasy in the chapel; of his angrily tearing up a dirty magazine which his companions were laughing at; of prophecies and dreams concerning the state of the Catholic Church in England and the future of the Salesian order; and even a vision about curing his own sick mother. Dominic vowed a special devotion to the Virgin Mary, and he

founded the Company of the Immaculate Conception at the Oratory. Interestingly enough, all its original members, except for him, became the very first Salesians.

In February 1857, due to deteriorating health and an inflammation of the lungs (tuberculosis), he was sent home. Bled to excess, he died, apparently in rapture, on March 9th, a few weeks short of his 15th birthday. Dominic Savio was declared Venerable in 1933, Blessed in 1950, and a Saint in 1954.

The Virtuous Salesian Student

Don Bosco's philosophy of education was progressive for the times. At the height of the Industrial Revolution in northern Italy, he had noticed that young boys, often from the countryside, found themselves homeless and adrift in the urban squalor of Turin. He decided to devote himself to their welfare, believing that, by re-creating as normal a home life as possible at the Oratory, he could save them from the worst spiritual and material ravages of their precarious existence. Education was then considered a bourgeois privilege, certainly not something for the poor or the working classes. He also espoused the learning of trades, thereby equipping the youth with employable skills.

At the Oratory, Don Bosco emphasized a number of important principles in the education of the boys: cheerfulness, leadership, piety (but not to excess) and, most importantly, the necessary control over the senses so as to avoid occasions of sin. The latter was often understood to refer to the ideal of bodily purity. When he wrote the life of Dominic Savio some years later, these were the same virtues and qualities which he portrayed the young saint as possessing to an extraordinary

degree. Savio thus became the ideal Salesian boy, the very model which all boys in all Salesian schools should emulate, and to whom they could turn for strength in fighting their own all-too-human battles for spiritual perfection. As Don Bosco wrote in the concluding chapter of Dominic's biography: "Let us resolutely imitate young Savio in those virtues which are suited to our state of life. Poor as he was, Dominic lived a life of joy, virtue, and innocence, and that life was crowned by a saintly death. Let us imitate him in the way he lived, and we shall have all the more reason to be like him in his precious death."⁹ Ultimately, the virtues which St. Dominic Savio had lived by were those which all Catholic boys should imitate since, upon his canonization, he had been declared patron saint of children.

Much ambivalence surrounds the virtuous Dominic Savio, however. As one reads Don Bosco's life of the youth, one is struck by the manner in which Savio is so often portrayed as an angelic youth – rather prissy, in fact – though Bosco goes to great lengths to assure his readers that the emerging saint was very much a boy like all the others, if perhaps less rowdy in character. There are even hints of some "special friendships" between Dominic and two other schoolmates with whom he was especially close. Though nothing sexual is implied, the tone of the text, when read for its ambiguities, does leave certain possibilities open. In the iconography of the young saint (statues, holy cards, and so forth), his most striking feature is his androgynous look. This is not unrelated to the manner in which the Salesians themselves chose to portray Savio, both visually and pedagogically: as a somewhat effeminate, virginal child. In an interview with the Canadian provincial

superior of the Salesians, I was struck by his admission that Dominic Savio had been “too sissified” by them; that there was a need for a more virile, masculine saint. I was then shown an outdoor statue of Don Bosco and Savio.¹⁰ The boy has an open-collar shirt (he was always shown with a jacket and tie), and he carries a soccer ball in one hand. Call it revisionism, or call it gender anxiety.

This moulding of saintly images and characters is rather commonplace in the history of Catholic hagiography. Saints can be two things simultaneously: the reflection of their own time and place; and universal, timeless symbols of religious heroism. They are eminently plastic figures, which is, in part, what makes them so attractive. They are exemplary, and this imitative quality can breed spiritual desire in the devotee: the saint as fervent object of admiration and worship, perhaps even of some form of erotic attachment or fixation. Dominic Savio’s ambivalence as the perfect and chaste, yet androgynously suspect, youth makes him susceptible to this, similar to the ways in which some virginal female saints can elicit forms of sensual attraction, if not obsession.¹¹ Consider how a sexually confused, young gay boy might respond to Dominic Savio, quite apart from the obviously religious aspects of the devotion to him as a saint. Desire is not foreign to sanctity. It may, in fact, be one of its most attractive qualities.

The relationship between Dominic Savio and John Bosco lies at the very heart of the meaning behind the young boy’s sanctity. No doubt theirs was a pedagogical relationship, that of teacher and mentor to student. But it was also one between saints, and it is quite remarkable how often Don Bosco, the adult of

the two, refers to Savio in reverential terms, at times even as the special protector and inspiration of his nascent religious order. Since the mission of the Salesians was the education and care of boys like Dominic, this makes sense. The general Salesian discourse about Dominic Savio is therefore consistent with how the order understood its educational mission in the church: the formation of virtuous young men. “Virtuous” could mean many things – obedience, generosity, piety, even cheerfulness of heart – but it implied above all purity. And for young adolescents, this implication was clear: be chaste in mind and body; above all, be wary of that most serious and destructive of all sins, the solitary one.

Panic over Purity and Idle Hands

In a book entitled Sex Education and Training in Chastity, in a chapter entitled “The Solitary Sin,” published in 1930 and written by an American priest for his fellow priests, one can read the following:

The loss of the internal secretions is an important factor especially if the habit is excessive (...) because of the waste of the product that should be taken up by the blood and **that goes into the building of a man**. A comparison of a gelding with a stallion will give a good idea of the part played by this secretion **in building a boy into a man**. While self-abuse does not wholly defeat this purpose, it impairs it, when frequently practiced, to the extent of **taking the fine edge off a youth's condition**. The internal secretion must be carried by the blood to muscle, bones, brain, and nerve, and must be conserved if the boy wishes **to attain to vigorous manhood in body, mind, and will**.¹²

Quite apart from its highly suspect medical discourse and, interestingly enough, its close affinities with certain traditional Asian beliefs having to do with the yang essence, this passage is fascinating for a number of reasons. First, it very

clearly reflects a common Catholic negative understanding of masturbation (also known as the sin of self-abuse, hence the solitary sin) from the early part of the twentieth century. Second, it directly associates the growth of a young boy into “vigorous manhood” with the ability to refrain from indulging in the practice (and thereby retain his precious liquid) by drawing a rather picturesque parallel from the animal realm, that of a castrated horse and a stallion. Third, character and self-control are equated, thus making it absolutely obvious that chastity is essential to proper physical and moral maturity. The idle hands of boys, which are always the devil’s workshop, are never virtuous Catholic hands. They are always highly and dangerously problematic, if not outright delinquent.

The author of this little book shares many of the medical and psychological assumptions of his time: that semen is essential to physiological development, and that its excessive loss will stunt or harm physical growth; that refraining from self-abuse builds character and willpower; and that manliness is somehow a function of retention of semen. Elsewhere in the text, the author warns that masturbation can lead straight to fornication. In other words, self-abuse, though certainly sinful and to be avoided by all possible means, can be the start of much more serious moral slippage (“fornication” understood, of course, as non-marital sexual intercourse). The expression “taking the fine edge off a youth’s condition” is an interesting one. It implies the loss of some form of pristine innocence. We find echoes here of the old myths and superstitious beliefs about the physically and morally degenerative characteristics of any form of self-abuse.

Theologian Mark Jordan, in writing of the Catholic theological tradition on masturbation, what he calls “identity in solitude,” underscores that it was mainly concerned with the regulation of the most intensely private realm of all, that of the individual psyche. Monastic anxieties around this issue, as with much else in the realm of sexual behaviour, were transferred onto the laity, who were expected to behave according to equally high moral standards. Coupled with the intense and severe medical anxieties about, and campaigns against, masturbation begun in the seventeenth century and extending well into the twentieth, there arose a uniquely Catholic perspective on the virtue of chastity.¹³ This virtue, originally a canonical one in that it applied only to consecrated individuals, those under vows, became a central strategy in the church’s teachings on proper and decent sexual behaviour for young boys, hence the emergence of peer models like St. Dominic Savio. For young Catholic girls, on the other hand, self-abuse was never seriously understood as a major spiritual or medical problem (another example of the facile dismissal of the female sexual experience). The far more urgent concern was that of “saving” them(selves) from any pre-marital penetrative sexuality, hence the example of the pre-pubescent virgin-martyr St. Maria Goretti.

Cultural notions of masculinity and manhood are central to this discussion. There is implicit acknowledgement in this entire medical and theological edifice that male sexuality, associated most intimately with the symbol of semen, is wild and unpredictable, something hazardous and unsafe, ready to break out at the least provocation. Means of controlling it therefore become increasingly necessary and

desirable, medically and theologically of course, but also culturally and socially. It is not accidental, I would suggest, that the film Rebel without a Cause, with the dark and moody James Dean as its main character, came out in 1955. It reflected almost perfectly the anxieties and panic over contested notions of masculinity. A man was always someone in control: over his baser appetites, over his character, over his will, and certainly over his body parts. Lack of control implied not only a weak or sinful nature, something most unmasculine and effeminate, but it could have problematic social consequences, witness teenage rebellion and delinquency, to say nothing of rock 'n' roll! And all this downward slide began with that most private, secretive and selfish of all vices: a solitary sin with public import.

Enter St. Dominic Savio, the chaste and innocent one, the perfect boy. In Salesian schools, orphanages, summer camps and other educational institutions the world over, his angelic face and heroic virtue were supposed to keep Salesian boys under control, metaphorically and literally. Savio clubs, whose primary purpose was to encourage imitation of the young saint in all things, sprang up. His feast day on March 9th was the occasion for public ceremonials and contests of all sorts. His statue and image looked down serenely from Salesian walls, overseeing the preservation of manly Salesian virtues, but especially that of youthful purity. For that was his prized treasure, his true mark of greatness, his lasting legacy to us.

It bears mentioning that Dominic Savio was made Blessed in 1950 and declared a Saint in 1954 (only four short years separate the two dates), at a time of rapidly changing cultural values in the West. With these two titles, the young

Italian could be publicly venerated as a holy person, and be held up as an inspiring example for the emulation of the faithful, especially young males. The words spoken by Pius XII on the occasion of his canonization are significant: “While these heroes whom we have just honored [four others were made saints at the same ceremony] dedicated **all their manly strength** to combat evil, we see standing before us the figure of Dominic Savio, a young boy, not strong in body, but in soul dedicated **as a pure offering** to the supremely spotless and demanding love of Christ.”¹⁴ In declaring Dominic Savio “Venerable” in 1933, Pius XI identified purity, piety and zeal as the “three main springs” of his virtuous life. His remarks on purity are telling: “He had the **purity of the lily – angelic purity**, inspired by the Most Holy Virgin, Mother of all purity. This was ever surrounded by solicitous care (...) by Don Bosco and his Salesians (...) Purity, the **very first** quality, **forerunner** of all other gifts of God, the gift of the greatest vocations! (...) How great is the need to lift high the standard of this shining virtue **in the midst of our youth today!**”¹⁵ Clearly, the Catholic Church’s overriding concern was always with how best to uphold and defend the virtuous character of its youth.

The many lives of Dominic Savio are also his many faces: that of the pious and engaging youth, that of the pure and chaste boy, that of unrequited desire, that of saintly heroism. In the pages that follow, I will attempt to sketch out some of these uncertain and ambivalent features, ever mindful that, not only am I looking at a genuine Catholic saint, I am also peering at many other people’s reflections of themselves, if not, in fact, of myself.

ENDNOTES

¹This text is a draft introduction for a book on Saint Dominic Savio which I am currently researching and writing. Many of the themes touched upon herein will be considerably expanded in the final manuscript.

²The expression “raised to the honours of the altar” refers to canonization. It means that the new saint’s feast day can now be officially celebrated in a proper liturgical context.

³See Saint John Bosco, The Life of Saint Dominic Savio (New Rochelle, New York: Salesiana Publishers, 1996).

⁴Examples are a trio of young Jesuit saints: St. Stanislaus Kostka (1550-68), St. Aloysius Gonzaga (1568-91) and St. John Berchmans (1599-1621). A slightly older saint, patron of expectant mothers, is St. Gerard Majella (1726-55), a lay brother of the Redemptorist order.

⁵The best known modern example of a virgin-martyr is St. Maria Goretti (1890-1902), who was only twelve when she was murdered. In fact, she was the first female martyr to be canonized, not for having died for the faith like her early Christian predecessors, but because she fought so valiantly for her virginity. She was canonized in 1950, four years before Dominic Savio.

⁶See, among others, Peter Brown, The Cult of the Saints: Its Rise and Function in Latin Christianity (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1981), Stephen Wilson, ed., Saints and Their Cults: Studies in Religious Sociology, Folklore and History (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), and Kenneth L. Woodward, Making Saints: How the Catholic Church Determines Who Becomes a Saint, Who Doesn’t, and Why (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1990).

⁷See the entry on St. Dominic Savio in Butler’s Lives of the Saints – New Full Edition: March (Collegeville, Minnesota: The Liturgical Press, 1999), pp. 88-91.

⁸Saint John Bosco, op. cit., p. 38.

⁹Ibid., p. 151.

¹⁰The statue included, on one side of Don Bosco, a young female Salesian student, Blessed Laura Vicuna (1891-1904), a Chilean. This is an attempt to underscore the fact that the Salesians now work in the education of young girls.

¹¹ A notorious example of this is the manner in which Canadian author Leonard Cohen writes about his obsession with Blessed Kateri Tekakwitha, the North American Mohawk saint, in his novel, Beautiful Losers.

¹² Rev. Felix M. Kirsch, Sex Education and Training in Chastity (New York: Benziger Brothers, 1930), p. 258. Emphases mine.

¹³ Mark D. Jordan, The Ethics of Sex (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 2002), especially pp. 95-104.

¹⁴ As quoted in Saint John Bosco, op. cit., p. 168. Emphases mine.

¹⁵ Ibid., p. 163-4. Emphases mine.